[Mary Miller]

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Mary Miller (Negro),

97 Blackston Street,

Asheville, N. C.

Bootlegger

Douglas Carter, writer. THE CLUBHOUSE Original Names Changed Names

Mary Miller Liza [???]

THE CLUBHOUSE

“Hello, Liza, how's the juice today?” I used her term for the “corn” whisky that she sells, made from meal and sugar, illegally.

“You ain't never got anything bad in my house, is you?”

“No, Liza, I haven't, but I've noticed that some days it's better than others.”

“Well” (prolonged), “you know how it is, Mr. Douglas, I can't always get from the same man. Sometimes he runs short, and I has to get what I can, but I always sample it first, and I don't serve nothing that ain't good; you know that. Wasn't you here one day I sent back some bad stuff? What size can I serve you?”

“Nothing, right now, Liza; I'm working today.”

“Working?” (with emphasis) “Then what you doing here?”

“I want your story.”

“I ain't got no story. What you mean?”

“The story of your life, Liza, and your business.”

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“What for?”

“Well, it's part of my job. I'm writing life histories.”

“I don't see what you want mine for.”

“Because I'm sure it will be interesting. And besides, I've got my job to look after. My boss wants stories, and I have to get'em.”

The buzzer. A trip to the door, a long look, a string pulled, a click of the lock, and a well-dressed white man enters, coming up the specially built back steps, across the enclosed back porch, and into the kitchen, where our conversation has been taking place.

“Mr. Thomas, I didn't know you at first. You was standing so I couldn't see your face — just your feet.”

“That's all right, Liza, How are you?”

“Just fine, thank you sir; what size'll you have?”

A dime, I believe, Liza.”

It is a five-room house, in a Negro residential section, and the street is unpaved, which accounts for the back entrance. Liza got tired of customers tracking mud all over her living-

room floor. The kitchen, in which customers are received and served, is spotless: one could eat off of the expensive linoleum-covered floor, except for the customers' tracks.

The floor of the adjoining dining room is also linoleum covered, but less expensively. The furniture in this room is rather new, but the pictures, all framed, are stained with 3 age. There are prints exhibiting fruit, and a fine 19th century stool engraving. A corner china cabinet is filled with good glassware and silver plate; another, in the opposite corner, is stocked with an assortment of attractive plates and dishes.

The living room, at one of the front corners of the house, has some new furniture, some old. The davenport and a matching easy chair are of late design. On the floor is a handsome rug, correctly placed. The radio in one corner is rather old, but plays beautifully. On the wall nearby is an original oil painting, now very dim, showing an old-fashioned gristmill in a pleasing landscape. The gilt frame is very wide and heavy. Six Gibson girls adorn the space over the door connecting the dining room, and on the other side of the door is a round mirror, hung very high. A smaller door leads into the hall giving access to the bedrooms, and both doors are hug with heavy maroon drapes. The brick fireplace, with high mantle, has been closed, and the entire house is now heated with a pipeless, hot-air furnace, the outlet being in the doorway between the dining and living rooms. The upper part of the mantle encloses a rectangular mirror, and for adornments there are several vases and small [planter?] busts, the whole surmounted with an ancient clock.

The front and side window curtains and drapes are clean and 4 cherry, and the long, narrow table is attractively decked. In a corner is an old phonograph, disused and probably broken, topped with two vases of artificial flowers. Behind the davenport is a framed print showing a traditional Negro mammy reading tea leaves (or perhaps coffee grounds) for a summery-looking young girl in the dress of the sixties. There are miscellaneous chairs, a drop-leaf table, and two whatnots. There is plenty of light for reading, and the chairs are comfortable. Ash receivers are plentiful and placed conveniently. A few of Liza's customers make full use of this room and its facilities (but they must not have mud on their shoes).

Some of these affectionately refer to the establishment as the Clubhouse, and on occasion spend the whole afternoon there.

Most of the customers, however, make their purchases and depart immediately. Liza does not sell anything to Negroes, but she sometimes gives drinks to Negro friends who drop in. She cannot endure “niggers”, and will not have them around her. “They smell,” she says. “I can't stand that old 'nigger' smell. I went in that house across the street yesterday, and it seemed to me like I could smell it all night long.” There is no unpleasant odor about Liza's house; a fact in which she takes great pride, and one of the reasons why she has been able to retain her extensive white clientele 5 for 30 years or so.

Drinks may be bought for 3 ¢ up - the “dime” being most popular; nearly 2 ounces. A “bat wing” (8 ounces in a bottle) may be had for 33¢ if one desires to take some home with him. Full pints sell for 65¢. Incidentally, these prices are slightly higher than elsewhere in town.

There is seldom more than a gallon of “juice” in the house at any time, deliveries of fresh supplies being made as required. Whatever is on hand at the moment is kept in an enamel vessel on one end of the kitchen sink, which arrangement has two purposes: the whisky may be quickly disposed of in the event of a raid, and it is handy to the enamel-topped table on which the drinks are served. From the vessel on the sink, the whisky is dipped out with a small glass pitcher and then the required amount is poured into an ordinary drinking glass. At the same time, a glass of ice water is served. When the customer finishes his drink both glasses are immediately washed in hot water with soap, rinsed with cold water, and returned to their places in the adjoining cabinet.

Liza was born on a farm, about 12 miles away, and was the second of eight children. When she was quite young the family moved near town (the location is within the cooperate limits now), and continued farming. Liza helped. She tells about 6 her father hauling wood to town from the Weston Estate nearby. He had a fine team of young mules, of which he was very proud, and during the cold season, when farm work was slack, he

would drive about five miles to the estate for wood to sell in town. A white man who lived near Liza also hauled wood to town from the same source. He had a team of handsome horses. To reach the part of the Estate where the wood was available, it was necessary to cross the river by means of a ferry, and if a crossing were missed, there would be a long wait for the next. In fact, in the early morning the operator of the ferry would wait on the far side for the return trip of a wagon which had come for a load of wood, and the rival teams would often race to the ferry for the advantage. Liza says that her father won the race more often than not, and a son of the white man confirms it. I talked to him not long ago, and he smiles broadly over his recollections of the races, in many of which he took part himself, as a youngster. He likes to tell, to Liza's disgust, of his knack of hitting her in the head with rotten apples, or other missiles, whenever she teased him. He is a customer, but lives in another county now, and appears infrequently, buying a quart at a time.

At the age of sixteen Liza married, and her husband is still her hero, though he died about 1900. They had one 7 daughter, who in turn had a son, Jake, and this grandson of Liza's was her alter [ego?] until his death several years ago. The daughter having died, Liza thought of Jake as her own son, and often referred to him as such. After her husband died, Liza was employed as a maid by a white family in town. Soon she was the cook. Afterwards, she cooked for other families.

“How did you get started selling liquor, Liza?”

“You white people [done?] it. When I was working for you all, you kep' sending me out after something to drink - after the town went dry, that is - and after while I got to thinking. I was working for Miz Holt then. Her husband and her brother was always wantin' some likker, and I had to go get it. They knew where it was, but they must've been scared to get it themselves. They told me where to go, and give [me?] the money, and I went and got it. Then I got to thinking, as I say, and I got a fellow to bring me in some on a freight train, and I put it in my room. They'd been giving me 30¢ to get it for 'em, but after that they was giving me 30¢ and buying my own likker!” (Very emphatically.) “They knew it was mine!

I told 'em. But they didn't care about that - it was good likker; better than the juice I sells now. Then I got to thinking again - I knew lots of people wanted likker.

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“Well, I quit Miz Holt, and got to keeping good likker to sell. I was living on Burt Street then, and I made real money. Mr. Holt and Miz Holt's brother, Mr. [?], kept right on buying from me till they moved away from here about ten years ago. They was always my friends.

“After the war - the Big war, I mean - I moved to Tabb Street, and started handlin white juice, as well as bottled-in-bond stuff. Why, I used to get 50¢ for the drink I sell for a dime now! The bonded likker brought $8 to $10 a quart, and cost [me?] $5. Then I bought this place. I've never handled logal likker here; there's more profit in the other, now. And besides, all I want now is just a small, quiet little business - you know, like I got - I ain't took much heart in things since Jake died. My niece, Norma, got me to take her to New York last summer, and we never stopped - we was there ten days - I got kin there - and we saw everything - but I didn't like it.”

The exterior of Liza's house is more attractive than the inside. The white paint looks fresh, and there is a nice lawn, well tended. She has flower beds on both sides, and a garden in the back. Entering the house by the rear door, one finds a crushed-stone driveway leading from the paved sidewalk to the back, where an outside stairway, enclosed with lattice, is protected by a heavy door in which a glass panel is set. One announces his arrival by sounding the buzzer, 9 the button to which is beside the door. He is inspected from the door at the head of the stairway, and if he is recognized as a welcome customer, the spring look is operated by a concealed sting running from the upper door to the lower, whereupon he can enter. if the visitor is not recognized as a customer, or is undesirable, he is politely turned away. Liza may say, “Sorry, mister, but I can't do you no good today.” Or, “This is a [?] house today. I ain't got a thing. I'm sorry.” If the visitor should happen to be “the law” (also know as “the booger”, or “boogerman”). Liza will say, “Just a minute”, return to the kitchen, pour whisky into the sink, flush it down, return to the door, open it,

and say, all smiles, “Come in.” This requires from 15 to 20 seconds, and when the police search like any other, except that it is cleaner than average. There are no whisky glasses - nothing to indicate any illegal activity.

The open hours are from about six in the morning to about nine at night, seldom later, often earlier. Liza lives alone now, but employs a Negro man, Oscar, who comes in about seven or eight in the morning and remains until closing time, or shortly before. He assists in the work, and is nearly as 10 popular with the average customer as Liza herself. In addition, he drives the car, a buick sedan, 1938 model. Liza owns a farm about eight miles from town, which she rents to a white family, and when the rent is due she usually takes the early part of the afternoon off to visit the farm, returning about four to take care of the late-afternoon trade. On occasion she closes the house in order to visit the shopping district, but is never gone more than two hours or so. She rarely leaves Oscar alone at the house, and if she does it is only for a few minutes. Liza likes to look after her own business. They eat two meals a day: breakfast at about ten, dinner at about four.

Once a year Liza given a party, and that is on the occasion of her birthday. She was sixty-five a short time ago, and she invited seven of her Negro friends to her celebration. The preparations required days, and Liza put forth her best efforts. She is a very good cook. I saw the fully set dinner table shortly before the quests arrived, and inspected the food that was later served by Oscar and a maid who had been employed for the purpose. Liza was using her best china, silver, and glassware, and the table was tastefully and attractively set and decorated - she has not forgotten the things she learned while employed years ago by cultured white families.

The menu: baked ham, roast turkey and dressing; garden peas, 11 yellow corn, carrots; stuffed celery, tomatoes, and lettuce, fruit salad, cranberry sauce, crystallized ginger; home-made rolls; mincemeat pie, marble cake, fruit wine, whisky, bar eggnog. Coca-Cola, coffee; after-dinner mints, almonds, chocolate candy, cigarettes.

Liza favored me with a generous sample of turkey, dressing, ham, stuffed celery, cranberry sauce, and crystallized ginger, served with a hot roll, [?] it was all delicious. And she gave me a pint of her home-made wine to take home! Just before I left the house, Mr. [?], a valued customer arrived with a birthday gift: flowering plant, which Liza highly regards.

That [recalls?] the visit of Mr. Chambers recently. Liza received him with howls of delight, saying “Why, Mr. Chambers, where in the world is you been? I ain't seen you in years. Lessee - it's been three years, ain't it? I didn't know what in the world happen' to you. Where you been?

“Yes, it has been about three years, Liza. I've been working in Pennsylvania; and I've missed this place, too. You are looking good. Behaving yourself?

After about five minutes of pleasantries, she asked the customary question: “What size'll you have?”

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He replied, “I'm not drinking now, Liza; I've quit. Haven't had a drop in two years. I just came by to see you.”

She told me later that he is one of the two handsomest men who ever came to her place.

Another time, Dr. Morse, local dentist, dropped in “just to show Liza my new Buick. I knew she'd be interested in the 1939 model - she has a 1938 model herself. No, thank you, I don't care for a drink. It's a little too early for me.” This in answer to another customer who had greeted him. To Liza: “Come on out and look at my new Buick. It'll make you sick of your ancient trap.”

Liza's customers include wealthy men, poor, men, farmers, lawyers, doctors, mechanics, railroad men, salesman, collectors, truck drivers, and many other. She does not extend

credit as a rule, but one of her customers pays his bill monthly, mailing her a check. He keeps the account himself - she does not like to be bothered, and she trusts him. Sometimes, though, other old customers make small purchases on credit, and a few times Liza has loaned small amounts of money to certain of her patrons, “until tomorrow, or “until payday, but she does not like to do it. She has few women customers, but there are several wives who frequently drop 13 their husbands off at the Clubhouse and return for them later. Sometimes these wives come in with their husbands and have drinks themselves. On other occasions they come in while their husbands drink, and await them.

Liza does not like crowds in her house. Almost all of her customers come in their own automobile, and when those are six or seven of them parked in front of her house she begins to get nervous. If any more arrive, she tactfully manages to get rid of the earlier ones. She very rarely has trouble with drunks. Once in a long while, she says, one of her customers will get a little bit “too tight” - perhaps, without her knowing it, he is nearly intoxicated when he arrives - whereupon she will get someone to drive him home in his car, if he has one; otherwise, she will send him home in a taxi. She turns away those who seem drunk when they apply for admission.

“Have you ever been arrested, Liza?”

“Yes, a few times.”

“What did they do to you?”

“I had to pay a fine. Not so very much. But they haven't bothered me lately.”

“What if legal liquor store are established here?”

“Then I'll quit. I can't go on if they bring legal likker back.”

“What will you do? How will you live?”

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“Oh, I've got a little something.”